

A crowd of diverse people, including men and women of various ethnicities, are shown in a protest or rally setting. They are wearing various clothing, some with visible logos like 'WASH STATE'. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# **A History of Anti-Racist Action with Shannon Clay**

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Here's our interview with Shannon Clay, co-author of *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action*. For this episode, Shannon and I walk through the book, covering some of the history of the network, how it evolved, challenges it faced, and invitations to discuss current day anti-fascist and anti-racist organizing on Turtle Island.

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**Shannon Clay:** I am Shannon Clay, he/him. I am one of four co-authors of the book *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action*, which is recently published by PM Press. My other three co-authors, Michael Staudenmaier, Kristin Schwartz, and Lady were all members of ARA back in the day, various chapters. I'm actually the only one of us who was not, ARA was a bit before my time basically.

**TFSR:** Thanks for taking the time to have this chat. I really appreciate it.

**SC:** Thanks so much for having me.

**TFSR:** A pleasure. So a few weeks ago from when we were recording this, at least, I had spoken with two of the people that had worked on the podcast version of *It Did Happen Here*, also published by PM Press and also a collaboration with Working-Class History, focusing on some of the struggles around the far right and the creation of Anti-Racist Action out of the skinhead scene and punk scene in Portland, Oregon in the late '80s, early '90s. So this feels like a really poignant companion to that. Since that was pretty particular to the Portland area and it did give some of the Baldies' background because of Mic's connection to that, I wonder if you wouldn't mind giving listeners a brief rundown of Anti-Racist Action, what it was, how long it lasted as a network iteration that's covered in the book, *Points of Unity* and some of the basics.

**SC:** Anti-Racist Action was a militant, direct action-oriented, anti-racist, and anti-fascist youth movement, predominantly in the US and Canada, most active from its beginning in 1986 until our book ends coverage around 2003. We can later talk about that. By that time, ARA is becoming much smaller and also evolving much more into a newer style of anti-fascism. ARA would continue from 2003 until 2013 when it was reconstituted as the Torch Network. ARA rose out of skinhead and punk scenes to very concretely kick white supremacist, racist nazi boneheads out of the scenes and protect themselves, and arose out of that to become a really significant anti-racist and anti-fascist movement. Predominantly youth involvement, as I said, but ended up being hundreds of chapters, probably thousands of activists are really quite a big deal that maintains those roots to youth culture into punk rock and stuff, but also did manage to grow beyond them in interesting ways, and became – how I describe it to the much shorter version I give to people who maybe don't have as much context is I just say – proto-Antifa. ARA very much laid the groundwork for what we now call Antifa, anti-fascist organizing in the US and Canada.

And I could maybe mention that as far as the connection to *It Did Happen Here*, great podcast. Great. I don't have the book yet. But when I do, it's gonna be a great book. As you said, they cover Portland. So we actually quoted from them pretty significantly for an early chapter of our book on those early years of ARA, and we complement each other nicely. *It Did Happen Here* is a deep dive into one city. ARA is one player among many. We are a nice inverse of that, of Oliver area's

history in many different cities across many different places.

**TF SR:** Cool. So as chapters coalesced and formed into these various networks, whether it'd be Syndicate to ARA Net, and I guess, to just Anti-Racist Action as an umbrella, there were shared Points of Unity among the groups. Because there were plenty of people that were in it that a lot of people can have anti-racist perspectives and be against the organizing of the Klan, or at that time, White Power movements, especially in the sub-cultures. It should be a pretty basic stance to be anti-racist. But that some shared values were expressed in the formulation of ARA as this network. I would love it if you could talk a little bit about what some of those Points of Unity were.

**SC:** Thank you so much for reminding them and not skipping over them. Is it cool if I actually just read them? They're pretty short, I think. Cool.

ARAs Points of Unity, are the basic building blocks of agreement that if you're in ARA, this is what we all agree and share. Whereas some groups have them, Points of Unity can be a pretty abstract or long document. ARAs were really punchy and to the point.

So "number 1, where we got the title from, "We go where they go. Whenever the fascists are organizing, we're active in public, we're there. We don't believe in ignoring them or staying away from them. Never let the nazis have the streets."

Number 2: We don't rely on the cops or the courts to do our work for us. This doesn't mean we never go to court but we must rely on ourselves to protect ourselves and stop the fascists.

Number 3: Non-sectarian defense of other anti-fascists. In ARA, we have a lot of different groups and individuals. We don't agree about everything and we have a right to differ openly. But in this movement, an attack on one is an attack on us all. We stand behind each other.

Number 4: We support abortion rights and reproductive freedom. ARA intends to do the hard work necessary to build a broad, strong movement against racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, discrimination against the disabled, the oldest, the youngest, and the most oppressed people. We want a classless, free society. We intend to win!"

Thanks again for asking. Because one, they are a really good, condensed way to understand fundamentally what ARA stood for, and two – they are punchy, "we go where they go, we intend to win". Good work on those Points of Unity. So a really important aspect of the history for sure.

**TF SR:** Absolutely. It's interesting when people start to coordinate over wide distances, or among larger groups of people setting out clear, basic things. It covers enough operational standards that people can agree to like, "Okay, we'll go do a thing together, we may not agree on every single thing. But these few points are super succinct." What I want to say also is that because we try not to be a US-centric show, I liked the fact that the book had a whole section, specifically on some of the chapters north of the border

**into so-called Canada. Some of the wins that were there were just fantastic.**

**But also I wonder if you wouldn't mind talking about how the discussion of access to reproductive autonomy and abortion became a part of the Points of Unity because that was not an initial part of it. I'm jumping this question on you.**

**SC:** Great question. Can I take this opportunity to go back and I can lay some groundwork and then masterfully weave it back more directly into your question? As we saw in the Points of Unity, reproductive freedom was a pretty explicit focus for a lot of ARA despite its name, Anti-Racist Action, and it was best known for anti-fascist politics. I think it's really cool that it then brought in this reproductive freedom aspect.

To talk a bit about how we got there, I would just go back to get a little more detail about how it started. It started with skinhead and punk scenes of kids having fun, having their music scene, and having their physical spaces. And racists, far-right people pretty explicitly targeting especially skinhead culture for recruitment into racism, which a lot of people hear skinhead and immediately think of racism or nazis. But in fact, to this day within skinhead culture that's not at all given. Skinhead culture was started as an explicitly multiracial culture of the working class, Black kids and white kids in the UK, coming together over music and just partying. That's what skinhead was. It was tied to punk and it was a music scene. And you had nazis coming in. ARA was started by anti-racist skinheads specifically kicking racist skinheads out of the scene. A lot of the time, they were their own crews. They had the names: the Baldies, SHARPs (skinheads against racial prejudice), et cetera. ARA was a name to maybe bring in non-skinheads.

ARA always had those roots on the street level, I would say, including the use of physical confrontation. You can't understand the roots of the ARA without understanding that sometimes it was just beating the shit out of some nazis who are coming to your show. Those are the roots. That's where it comes from. And that continues because that's its roots that really inform ARA throughout its history.

Then as it evolves, in the '90s, for example, you have ARA having a similar confrontational attitude against the Klan and a really big part of how ARA grows. There are Klans, especially in the Midwest, traveling all over having a rally a week. As opposed to pretty explicitly some cultural stuff, it is a bit more public-facing and Klans who are trying to get their message out to the public, they're speaking at a courthouse and getting their message of something-something-white-supremacy. And then ARA is there and maybe it's not a turf war in the same way it was for the skinheads, but still oftentimes confrontational. Things could get thrown for example, or even if it is just really shouting things down. ARA was a street-level, direct-action-oriented organization where the way that they tried to affect change was by being there, by doing it directly.

Throughout its history, there were ARA members who were doing pro-choice work, too. That's really cool. But then, again, as I said masterfully, weaving it back to your original question of how it became a network-line thing, we start that story in 1996. So a good 10 years after the initial formation of ARA, two years after the ARA Network coalesced, it wasn't just disparate chapters calling themselves

by the same name and maybe they knew each other. There was this organizational structure and a network that had yearly conferences and stuff, that network was started in 1994. In 1996 is when ARA in Minneapolis is looking around their city, and by this time they had pretty meaningfully beaten the nazis and an organized racist presence out of their city. And nazis were not really able to walk the streets, or be at punctures and stuff the way that they had been 10 years ago. So they were looking around and they were thinking “Well, but what is affecting us on a day-to-day level?” They saw a very real presence of far-right, Christian-right, anti-abortion people. We have a quote in the book somewhere from an ARA in Minneapolis organizer named Katrina, something like “they fit the definition of fascism to us,” they’re seeing these far-right anti-choice people.

That inspired the ARA in Minneapolis to start doing some more pro-choice work in their own city. A really big reason why it was able to work was that it had tactical similarities to that street presence, direct action, and confrontational stuff that ARA had roots in. That’s not the only aspect of reproductive justice, but the aspect of reproductive justice that ARA was often doing was the street-level of things like clinic defenses. So that’s where you have an abortion clinic and you might have anti-abortion protesters who were as close as they’re legally allowed to be, but they’re shouting down, just trying to make it as intimidating and unwelcoming as possible to people coming in to get health care, maybe physically blocking people from getting into the clinic, maybe throwing shit, maybe attacking people. The anti-abortion movement still is and especially at this time was strong, and crazy. So you needed a presence of that physical street level of pro-choice people ensuring physical access to these clinics. That was a big part of what ARA chapters then got up to.

I mentioned Minneapolis, but as I said, for a long time, many different chapters have this orientation of getting on this street-level organization, physically defending clinics, and physically ensuring open access to clinics, escorting people into their appointments in order to support abortion rights. Because they saw around their towns that a lot of the people pushing anti-abortion politics... Their politics had a lot in common with fascism, a lot of pretty direct, just personnel ties of like “Hey, I’ve seen that person around before. They also do this white supremacist organizing, who knew?” So, a pretty natural outgrowth of ARA’s early anti-fascist and anti-racist organizing because of that technical element that it was something that they were capable of, that it was on the street level, then leads to Minneapolis taking it on and then even promoting it to the network as “Hey, guys, this is something that we should care about.”

At the national level, not a ton of decisions were made. The main thing about the network was this conference that happened every year, where there were workshops and an opportunity for people to get together and network. Basically, what the network looked like was the most you could do at the national level pretty much was the Points of Unity. So, Minneapolis then came and said that “we should explicitly build being pro-choice into our Points of Unity, which they weren’t up to that point, and make it explicit that if you want to be a part of this anti-racist movement, you need to be pro-choice. We want to understand the connections between white supremacy and anti-choice politics.” So they promoted a resolution to

incorporate that into the Points of Unity, first in 1997, and it didn't pass, but then it did pass in 1998. Having really led and facilitated that conversation within the network brought a lot of people around to it. The network successfully adopted that resolution for pro-choice politics.

**TFSR: The chronological development in the book is super helpful for me. I was a teenager/child when a lot of this stuff was happening. From other readings, the chronology of the book really helps me to fill out the story of the development of anti-racist organizing in so-called North America or Turtle Island, which is gushing.**

**SC:** Thank you.

Can I riff off that a bit? Because you didn't just say the chronology of ARA, you said the chronology of anti-racist organizing and I think that's true. Before this book, so little has been publicly available knowledge about ARA. As I said, ARA was before my time, so I came to the book as I heard about ARA and I was like "That sounds really cool. Weird that I've never heard anything about this and can't find anything out about it." So that was what started the whole process that eventually led to the book. But anyway, the point is that there was so little available about it. But ARA, it's really worth stressing, was a pretty big deal. As someone who loves very obscure histories, ARA was not all that obscure, it was all over the so-called US and Canada. It was in many cities, as I said, with hundreds of chapters, and thousands of activists. And we are talking about the book, especially for white counter-cultural youth – not to underplay the influence and the participation that people of color have in the organization – but especially for a certain demographic of youth who wanted to get involved in progressive politics, ARA was THE game in town for anti-racist organizing in many significant ways. So I guess that's a lot of words just to say that ARA was a big deal.

**TFSR: Pointing out that, as you say, it is a point in this history of the development of anti-racist organizing in its various forms... There's also a reference to the fact that, as you said, the Torch Network was somewhat of a rebirth of parts of the network in 2013. Then also on one of the sections that do talk about non-Midwestern development of chapters, Michael Novick is interviewed who is the main person behind *Turning the Tide* newspaper that's been running for a couple of decades, plus the LA ARA chapter, which was also called PART. Also, Michael had been a part of a pre-existing formation that James Tracy co-authored a book about in 2020.**

**SC:** With Hillary Moore.

**TFSR: Yeah, exactly. Called *No Fascist USA!: The John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and Lessons for Today's Movements*, I've definitely heard right-wing conspiracy people drawing these lines and saying, "That was a product of SDS and Weather Underground, and before that, it was the Rosenbergs, and then it was Stalin!" But it is cool that there is some continuity there.**

**There's a multi-generationality of these forms and a legacy that gets transmitted through, and it evolves according to the people that are there and to the needs of the moment, too.**

**SC:** There's a lot of good stuff there and I'll try to be quick... I laughed, but the only thing that made me laugh at that right-wing conspiracy thing was the mention of the Rosenbergs that came out of left field. Legitimately, JBAK did grow out of or it was four members of SDS and definitely, some of them were former members of the Weather Underground.

**TFSR: Or Prairie Fire, at least, right?**

**SC:** Yeah, Prairie Fire became Weather Underground. So, definitely a continuity there. Then it's a bit more of a gap between JBAK, the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, and ARA, but there were still connections there. Novick is one very important embodiment of that. Also, Cincinnati and Chicago are two very early and important ARA - I was gonna say chapters, they were early enough, they probably wouldn't even use the word chapter. They were skinhead crews who were calling themselves Anti-Racist Action... Cincinnati and Chicago were two examples where they knew JBAK people, and then as you said, Michael Novick. So, that is a really cool example where ARA. That's important. But absolutely, ARA did have the exception that proved the rule, were cool, important people like Michael Novick, important to the history of ARA, people who had been around for a while, and who did bring in that continuity and that memory. And Michael Novick especially.

You mentioned *Turning the Tide*, it is the journal that he's been publishing for almost four decades now of really good, tight, anti-imperialist anti-colonial analysis. That's something that he really brought to ARA, ARA didn't necessarily have otherwise because a lot of ARA members - and this is cool - were not full-time Marxists or whatever. A lot of them were random kids from their local punk scene who wanted to get involved in something. And then you had that generational continuity of people who had been around for longer, taking that next level of analysis in history. That did have those ties for sure.

**TFSR: Please fill in the details because there's so much in this book. This is approached in the book and discussed as both positives and negatives, but a lot of white suburban kids coming in, wanting to do good, but also bringing their perspectives and their experiences in towards anti-racist organizing, and within the framework of the subculture. You mentioned in the book that at one of the conferences Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, who's a Black Anarchist, gave a critique of the heart of membership diversity within the network, as well as addressing systematic oppressions besides just the visible boneheads in the streets. Which is a good topic to bring up. I think that that coalesced, at least in the way that the book was written, it corresponded to chapters taking that critique, whether it be from Mr. Ervin or other sources to heart, and expanding out into other forms of anti-racist or-**



**ganizing, recognizing things like the racist police as being an institution of racism that needs to be challenged, or working around prisoner solidarity stuff. We've already mentioned the stance into action around reproductive rights, but also queer defense and working in solidarity with independent folks or groups like Act Up.**

**I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that discussion about who are the participants and who shapes the direction of ARA. How do people try to address that?**

**SC:** I am happy to add detail. At the same time, even the way you put the question, you did manage to capture a lot of good stuff. I don't know if I would call them all necessarily "suburban". But I know what you mean.

ARA always had these roots in punk and hardcore. That was a really big part of where its membership came from, where it recruited from, where it got a lot of material support from and so even if it wasn't full-time ARA members, they were doing fundraisers and stuff. That's how they get a lot of support. So, those cultural ties were always very real. If people are familiar with the punk scene, then they can use this metaphor. If you're not, that's okay, you can leave it and I believe this will still make sense. But I see the punkness and the whiteness in ARA as parallels. The parallel is that people sometimes talk about punk and ARA as a mostly "white" thing. You have to balance what numerically, at least in the so-called US and Canada, that is probably true. But you have to balance acknowledging the shortcomings of that, or just acknowledging what something is mostly white people, with not erasing the contributions of people of color. And so ARA as a decentralized network, many of its chapters were pretty multiracial. Those might often be, for example, in cities where the punk scene was also multiracial: Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, and some places in Southern California where the punk scene was very heavily Chicano and Asian. Those are places where you might get ARA chapters that were more multiracial, and then in other places, ARA might be more white.

In the case of the anti-Klan rallies, for example, a lot of times the Klan is coming to some random town in the middle of Indiana, and it is a pretty white area. Then you have kids who are in that town in Indiana, who want to stand up against it. So, that's going to be a pretty white chapter, for example. ARA definitely would not have been what it was without the contributions of many important members of color, especially in the early skinhead years, starting of multiracial skinhead crews.

As far as how that impacts politics, ARA was definitely best known for anti-fascism. Its name was Anti-Racist Action. But it really started quite specifically as an anti-fascist thing, where they're trying to push fascists out of their scene. Then you have someone like Kom'boa Ervin, who at the 1997 national conference gave a speech that criticized the ARA as too focused on.... I think I've heard it described as a "rival vanguard's critique", where you had ARA of a vanguard of the "good whites" who are anti-racist, fighting against this vanguard of the "bad whites". They're nazis and stuff. To a degree, that's quite true of ARA - we want to be nuanced - but it's true that, whether that's how you want to describe it or not, ARA

was best known for anti-fascism. The whiteness of anti-fascism, a lot of times you didn't have a ton of people of color who wanted to go to Klan rallies to shout them down and oppose them. But still, we spoke to some people for the book, who talked about they did go to the anti-Klan rallies and they were the only person of color at the entire event. So, even though they're on the anti-racist side and surrounded by anti-racists, still that might not be the most appealing activity.

There were a few different ways of thinking of the whiteness of ARA, where people were not only critical of it. So we have someone named Matt, who was a Cincinnati ARA member, who spoke about "every white kid in ARA is a white kid who's not in the Klan." So, they are very concretely competing for the same members who might otherwise be recruited into racism. Having lots of white people in your organization is a victory insofar as that's lots of white people who are not racists. That's mission accomplished. We quoted a Chicago area member named Tito who talks about fascism, and racism in white communities. He was saying that he thinks that that should be the responsibility of white people. The white people should be the ones going to these things and taking care of them.

So, ARA was quite white, a lot of the time, throughout its whole history never really came to a single decision about that. Because there is a tradition of leftist groups who are white anti-racist groups, that's their point. This is where white people can come and contribute to anti-racism. We can relate to people of color groups in different ways, we can follow their leadership. Something like SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice), for example, is a pretty, at this point, big organization where the model is that "we are the white people who are here and able to support organizations led by people of color." That's what ARA was not, but then it wasn't super clearly a really multiracial, anti-racist organization. So it had different approaches at different times, different people, different chapters, between "hell yeah, every white person [here] is a white person not in the Klan, that's good" or "it's white people's responsibility," or people like Ervin critiquing it like "if we want a sustained and most meaningful anti-racist organization, then we can only be concerned with the 'vanguard of the fascists', or the 'vanguard of the racism', we need to be worried about more day-to-day and institutional racism, like the police, racial capitalism, poverty - things that realistically do impact more people of color's daily lives than probably a literal nazi walking down the street." Different chapters tried to organize that style in different ways. We have a whole chapter about that.

You had multiracial chapters, like Detroit or Toronto. Maybe that was just based on where they were from, Toronto was based in a pretty multiracial city. 50% of the population of Toronto was not born in Canada. I didn't know that, I learned that from my co-author, Chris. Even the punk scene in Toronto was quite multiracial. So they were based on that while still being quite directly anti-fascist. ARA Detroit, for example, managed to be definitely one of, if not the only, majority-POC ARA chapters, and they were organizing around economic demands. The city of Detroit was spending all this money on "urban development", "urban renewal" and building a giant stadium. So, ARA demanded that a certain amount of these jobs should go to local Black youth. These should be good-paying jobs, and we should not have poverty wages in the city. They also had ties to a Black high school. These were ways in which they did manage to bring in, through their organizing

more specifically Black members. I hope that wasn't too much. But it's tough, because ARA was such a rich tapestry of many different chapters in cities and over time, that there's no one single representative answer of the entire network. It was different cities doing things in different ways. That was the race aspect.

**TFSR: That answer being longer is perfectly fine because I packed a bunch of presumptions into it that you were unpacking and being like "Well, that's interesting you said suburban..."**

**Most of these chapters, as I noticed, are actually city chapters. So they're an urban atmosphere.**

**SC:** But I also do want to give credit to and I think it's really cool that ARA was in - suburban has not occurred to me before - but in rural or small-town America a lot of the time with the anti-Klan organizing. The one that just always got dropped was Goshen, Indiana, a small town in Indiana, and a bunch of white kids living in the same trailer park. So it is really cool that ARA had this model that was relevant to people in that situation, and that you didn't have to be in a city for ARA to work and abandon rural areas to the racists.

**TFSR: Yeah, and having a central point of unity and the yearly gathering and the zines or bulletins to be able to communicate between chapters. It seems like a flexible model for people to focus on things that they felt they need to focus on where they were, and not just a cookie-cutter model across the continent.**

**SC:** For sure.

**TFSR: Some chapters focused on police brutality in the wake of a racist police murder, and racist media coverage in response to it. Finding the common threads with other extensions and expressions of white supremacy, patriarchy, settler colonialism, and learning how to fight it where you're at, and also having a network of people that have your back, and is super inspirational. No wonder it lasted so long.**

**SC:** Absolutely.

**TFSR: Another question that I had is whether there is some talk in the book of outside organizations either interacting or sharing membership with ARA members or chapters or not. There's a section where the ISO [International Socialist Organization] didn't want to mess with or have anything to do with ARA, I guess because of the street-based politics of it. Whereas the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers League had members who were involved. That was a carryover from the skinhead era, right? When folks were splitting into- People who had shared space split into different sides of the more nationalist, skinheads against racism who were the Pro-Am / Pro-America and then the leftists either went down a Marxist or an-**

archist route. But there's a mention of the Northeast Federation of Anarcho-Communists [NEFAC], or Love and Rage Anarchist Federation.

There's a little bit of a sense in the book about how people interfaced in their chapters with these organizations. I wonder if there was much of a reference to a sense of entryism at any point where these organizations wanted to make ARA a thing that they did or had interaction with. There's the Cincinnati killing, for instance, it was Cincinnati's response to police violence leading to the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation being formed. That model from the early '90s of responding to racist police murders or just police murders in general and centering the family members of the people that were killed by the police and changing the narratives and also organizing the community against racist policing, in a lot of places around the country that got taken over by Revolutionary Communist Party, the RCP, Bob Avakian cult took that over. There were some mentions in *It Did Happen Here*, where people had a criticism of leftist organizations coming in and either just using ARA chapters as their boot-squad, or trying to inject their party politics into ARA. Is that a thing that you were familiar with from these interviews or that seems to be an element?

SC: Absolutely. This is usually a bit simplistic obviously but we're all comrades here, we'll build a mental schema and divide the answer into the "good" – of when ARA was working with comrades in a good way in other groups – and "bad."

So I'll start with the bad stuff. Entryism didn't end up being a huge problem because it was and ARA managed to solve it. We mentioned that ARA is an international network with some actual infrastructure between cities and not just informal ties. That international network started in 1994. At the very first meeting of that, ARA was actually just part of it. So that's why initially, it actually called itself the Midwest Antifascist Network. But don't let that confuse you. It was renamed to ARA Network a year later in 1995. But in 1994, at this first conference, there were other communists, and there was a real sense of concern from the ARA people that it really seemed there were people who were trying to make a national structure that could bring in people and they could bring in these lumpen ARA members. But then there would be this convoluted committee structure and a National Coordinating Committee that the communists who were proposing this structure would presumably be in charge of it, and then they could have this front group that they would be pulling the strings on. The ARA members thought that that's what it seemed like this more centralized structure could lead to that some people at the 1994 conference were suggesting and they said, "We don't like that." That's what led to the network having the very decentralized structure that it did end up having, specifically the very horizontal structure it had, where there was no Central Committee. I'm going to quote an ARA member named Jerry, "There was no central committee to stack with your people." The way that the network was structured was on national decisions, any one chapter got two votes, regardless of chapter size. So, even if you had an RCP or an ISO or whatever with really strong control, and who just decided "Let's join ARA, we'll bring our 300-member orga-

nization that's based in a couple of cities," that wouldn't really get them very far. Because they would have as many votes as everyone else. So they weren't able to take over.

So that was an anarchist influence of some anarchist members of ARA, although also one of the organizations you mentioned was the Revolutionary Workers League, which had Trotskyist ARA members who grew out of the Cincinnati skinhead scene. They were not a huge group, but they were Trotskyists. But they were agreeing, they had been in ARA from the ground floor, had a better understanding of it, and being like "We're a part of it really, and we aren't an outside group." They were saying, "Well, in our own chapter in Cincinnati, there's us, we're Trotskyists, but there are a bunch of anarchists." By this point, there probably weren't patriotic American skinheads who didn't like nazis. But there might be centrist people. So they were like "Well, even in our own chapter, we have to have pretty broad Points of Unity that what we agree on is fighting nazis. Because if we agreed on the ideal formation of a Vanguard party to achieve socialism to build towards communism, then you would have all the anarchist members or the more liberal mainstream members being 'Well, that's not our politics.' So that's just one chapter. So then using that out across the entire network, and obviously, we need this to be pretty horizontal and there's room to disagree. That doesn't break our organization or the work that we're doing because what we agree on is anti-fascism."

The successful relationships with other organizations were – once that structure was established / the groups who knew and understood that model and scope- As I said, there was this Revolutionary Workers League who was very authentically a part of ARA from the beginning. This is less than 10 people. But they're not trying to take it over or whatever. The biggest outside organization would be the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, which had members in various cities. Love and Rage was initially an anarchist newspaper, and then they had a conference to bring together people from many different cities in order to build a structure to publish this anarchist newspaper Love and Rage and then that grew into Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation as an organizing group. So they doing their own thing, but a lot of them were involved in ARA, or a lot of ARA people were involved in Love and Rage. I've heard at least one person described that as "entryist" in the sense that there's this other political group who sees ARA and is like "Well, let's get involved in that." But the reason that I wouldn't call it entryism, or certainly that I don't think anyone viewed it as a particularly entryism, was that it understood that horizontality and there were no committees to stack with your people. So they are Love and Rage members, but they're also members of ARA, and so they're just trying to bring ARA in the direction that they want to see it go in, like any other member of ARA.

Then Love and Rage had an ARA working group of Love and Rage members who were in an ARA and they would talk together and think about what direction they wanted ARA to go in and advocate for that. But in an aboveboard way, and not weird entryism. I wish people could speak to the people who were there because most of the time, there have been funny stories of hapless college communists getting up to the microphone and they have their notebooks with a speech all written out about "ARA must build for the revolutionary working class and must

come to the masses” and something. Then someone told me that at some point, someone giving a speech like that just went over their time. They kept going over their time until some big skinhead just physically picked them up and just waddled out of the conference room [carrying them]. So pretty funny images in my head of hapless but ill-intent college communists trying to take over ARA. The national structure was built in a way that wouldn't allow that, influenced by an anarchist lens, or just by people who understood that in order for ARA to work, it had to be decentralized in order to bring people from many different backgrounds. After that, relationships with other organizations were more positive and equal, because ARA couldn't really be taken over. So if a chapter wants to work with someone, they can.

**TFSR: I really enjoyed this book. This is feedback that I gave to the *It Did Happen Here* folks, that there's a narrative structure that comes up and guides the conversation. Then you see little bits of people's personal narratives who were engaged in various chapters, talking about these things that affected them at the time, plus all the flyers. It's a really entertaining read. There's just so much in there. You built off of some of the stuff that was in the *It Did Happen Here* podcast. This is the similarity between the two, besides both working from some of the same interviews, also PM Press, Working-Class History. I'd love to hear about what this process for building the book looked like, and what your experience was of it.**

**SC:** Absolutely. *It Did Happen Here* is a deep dive into one city, and our book is a coverage of ARA as a whole network across two decades and all this stuff. So we definitely complement each other. We quote some of the same interviews. But, dear listener, don't be afraid, we're not repeating each other. Get both books. They're both a must-read, and you'll be smarty pants.

As far as the book process, I hope people are interested in this. I talking about it. I had a good time. My three co-authors were in ARA, I was younger. I first got involved as a student at University, and I had to write a final paper for my history degree. I heard about ARA and was really shocked at the fact that so little information about it seemed to be available, even though it seemed to be a really big deal. So I was like “There's got to be something here and we should probably write something about this and make the history more accessible.” So I reached out to the One People's Project out of New Jersey which is quite a public-facing Antifa group and does great work. Lady worked with them, and one of our co-authors...

**TFSR: Shout out to Daryle Lamont Jenkins!**

**SC:** Shout out to Daryle Lamont Jenkins, who put us into contact with Mic Crewnshaw of *It Did Happen Here* and another member of the Baldies, specifically a black skinhead of the same generation as Mic, put me in touch with someone else. Of all these who put me in touch with 40 different ARA members. I interviewed many different ARA members in order to write my little college paper. Then other people talked about how there should be a more publicly available history of

ARA, and so that ended up coalescing into the group of the four of us: me, Michael Staudenmaier, Kristin Schwartz, and Lady who wrote the book collectively.

I had a good time doing it. Well, writing a book is hard, but it started before the pandemic, then I was on pandemic unemployment and it seemed like a good time. That was a big part of my 2020 and the first half of 2021 pretty much writing this. It was a collective process. Super fun. I am super pumped to have gotten to know this earlier generation of radicals. I know it's two-dimensional, but it can still be discouraging to feel like you can't trust anyone over 30 or whatever. "Something something, racist Boomers..." "It feels like every person over 30 doesn't get it. Obviously, that's not true. Not mentioned it being ageist, but I didn't and very few people do have those intergenerational connections. I didn't know people who had been doing anti-racist militant work for 40 years, and this project allowed me to meet some of those people and learn so much from them. So I'm super grateful for it. Dear listener, maybe you can't have quite the wonderful experience I did. But by reading you, too, can learn from all these wonderful people.

**TFSR: Or if you're in an area that wasn't able to be a focus of the book just because of a) the scope of this project, but b) because there wasn't as much intense infrastructure in the area that you're at, but you have a history of ARA, maybe that's you could contribute to a follow-up book?**

SC: Yeah... Maybe? They can write the book, not me.

**TFSR: I'd definitely like to talk about the legacy, chapter 10. I guess this is a shortened version of it. But in a prior chapter, there was discussion of some of the hard turning points that ARA experienced, three tragedies that are focused on in one chapter: the increasing surveillance from cops and big charges coming against anti-racist organizers who were active in Kalamazoo. Was that World Church of the Creator?**

SC: That was I believe an anti-Klan rally. Those happened almost literally within the same week of each other: in Kalamazoo, Michigan, those arrests at an anti-Klan rally. But then, over in Las Vegas, there were two, probably the most visible, ARA members murdered by some of the nazis that they were organizing against. So, both of those events, also happening at almost exactly the same time in July of 1998, are self-evidently very big and traumatic deals and were real challenges for the network. It was Daniel Shersty and Lin 'Spit' Newborn.

Also, it's important to remember these histories that happened, worth calling out that Spit was Black and was one of the ARA's Black members, I believe, a skinhead. ARA was not a uniformly white organization, but it's also true that a Black member of ARA was in the minority. It's just telling, obviously, and tragic that of all the ARA members to be murdered – that's not to say that it would be okay if it was a white person who's murdered – it's telling that despite Black members of ARA being a relative minority, of the two people who were murdered, one of them was Black and that's what nazis do.

**TF SR:** He was also an outspoken musician, who took the opportunity during performances to read poetry against nazis and also in his music. And if you look at the June 2016 events in Sacramento California, it was a very diverse crowd. A lot of the people that got stabbed by nazis were specifically people of color or people that one could read as being gender non-conforming. I don't think that's an accident for sure.

**SC:** Charles, who was in Detroit ARA, remembers "My friend who I lived with and hung out with and it was in Detroit ARA, he was white, and I was Black. We were two of the main organizers in Detroit. Then what happens, a Black guy and a white guy got killed in Las Vegas. I definitely had some feelings about that. It was quite a blow to me personally, as a Black organizer in Detroit ARA." The murders of Dan and Spit reverberate for sure.

**TF SR:** Also the bringing of charges internally of gendered violence in the Columbus Ohio chapter, which held a lot of institutional responsibility but also power, I guess, in the network for having hosted a couple of the yearly gatherings, as well as the mailing list, maybe one of the big bulletins was based out of there.

**SC:** Yeah, the biggest one is called ARA News, because ARA as a network did not have a single national mouthpiece or whatever. The biggest one was ARA Columbus, or ARA News published by ARA Columbus helped by some funding of radical lawyers that they hadn't been involved.

**TF SR:** As anyone who's been in the community generally, but in an activist group, it's devastating to learn that people who have a social clout in our scenes and who are involved in organizing also engage sometimes in bad behavior towards each other, because we live in a patriarchal society and it's hard not to reproduce those patterns. I'm not meaning to blow it over and minimize the experience that people had there. It's an ongoing issue, obviously, in all of society, as well as in the microcosms of community organizing.

Do you want to talk about the impact of those things? I was gonna lead into just the lessons chapter. Because, among other things, there are lessons to be taken from all those. I appreciate the fact that the book talks about it, it gives at least three examples of problems that occurred that maybe folks involved in ARA didn't have all of the tools to be able to deal with at the time and that are ongoing challenge because of our society towards the continuation of and bettering of anti-fascist organizing and struggle. Again, the warts-and-all approach to history is good, is really important to not paint over that stuff. Because a lot of those issues, until we finally figure out patriarchy, those kinds of issues are going to be coming back over and over again. So, talking about people dealing with it in their various ways and not being silent about it is super important.



**SC:** I'm not going to play 4D Chess here and say, "Oh, those things were good, actually," but you can't tell the story of other things that ARA did that were positive without knowing those. So, for example, I was the one who had a pretty simple AB narrative of like "Oh, there were these allegations of sexual assault," in a few chapters, but most prominently in Columbus, because of their out-sized roles, almost de facto national network. That's bad, obviously. Then a bit after that, ARA got smaller. Therefore AB makes sense.

It was actually my co-authors, Kris and Lady, who both were a bit uncomfortable with that as a simplistic narrative. On their side, it's absolutely true that actually, 1998 was not the biggest year for ARA, a year later was, and it was a pretty significant rise. It was from 1996 to 1999. It went from 30 chapters to almost 200. So 1999 was the peak and not 1998, it wasn't a sudden drop. Lady who was in ARA Columbus, but after this conflict, didn't feel it super impacted the organizing that she saw happen. Another Columbus ARA member mentioned that with Columbus having less of a role in the national organizing, they focused a bit more on their own city and grew a bit in that sense. Then also, Kris really felt that there was really important and dynamic organizing that was done in response to the gendered violence in ARA, and that basically, she didn't want to paint this simplistic narrative of this bad thing happened and then ARA, especially the women in ARA were victims, and then it was bad. That there was a proactive response to it and they took it as an opportunity to confront and root out misogyny and patriarchy and gendered violence in their organizations. And that Toronto had some accountability processes with people in their own chapter. It was really hard, and they didn't like it. They felt for too much time, it was a huge part of what they were doing - just dealing with their own shit. But then they came out on the other end stronger. So, not that these sexual assaults and gendered violence things happening was good, they obviously weren't, but ARA can respond to it dynamically, and not be passive victims that have their own history. So that's another reason that the warts-and-all approach is important.

**TFSR: Thank you.**

**SC:** Courtesy of my two co-authors, Lady and Kris.

**TFSR: That's awesome. Thank you for pointing that out. Would you mind going through some of the contents of the legacy and lessons chapter at the end? Because that in conjunction with all the awesome history that comes before it is a nice invitation for discussion among folks.**

**SC:** Thank you. I do hope that people take it as an invitation to discussion, because it's so easy, perhaps too easy, on the left to wag your finger, and say, "This is how we should be doing it." So chapter 10, how we end the book is with the lessons that we as co-authors thought that we could take from the history of ARA, and we think that they're important, and we do think that they're good and important lessons, or else we wouldn't have written them. But I do hope that it can be, as you said, an invitation for continued discussion with all of us having the shared objective of

building and strengthening anti-fascism and anti-racism. And it's not me, as someone who is frankly not been super involved in on-the-ground anti-fascism, telling people who are involved in that how they're supposed to be doing things. Easy for me to say. So it is an invitation and it is a discussion, and I hope that anti-fascists can engage with it in a way other than just listen to what I think. That it can be a two-way conversation. But that's how we close the book, with some lessons that we thought were really important. I can get into those, humbly, if I dare.

For me, the first one that always comes to mind, just because it's very simple and concrete, is that ARA was a very public-facing group, compared to the default vision in people's heads of Antifa in 2023. I was really shocked when I first started researching about ARA and it came up in the first conversation I had with Daryle Lamont Jenkins, where I was like "Wait, so it sounds like you're describing the group that was above-ground." That just blew my mind. Because I just took for granted that anti-fascism is: you mask up, you are in a group of maybe six people who have known each other for years. You have to be extremely important about what you say to whom, and ARA didn't do that. So that's a really important lesson, not that people shouldn't do that, that people shouldn't be very security conscious, but that very closed-off anonymous way of organizing is not the only way to organize, is not how you have to organize. There's room for both. ARA did absolutely fucking throw down. Yet they were, in really important and inspiring ways, able to do that without being this small revolutionary cadre organization that people couldn't get involved in. You can have an organization that has different levels of risk.

The vignette that we opened the book with involves a smaller but still 100+ group of people having a "baseball game", where nazis were going to hand out tickets and tell a location for a white power music show, ARA was there with bats, and they were militant. But then after they had shut down the person handing out directions, they went to where they knew that the show was being held. There was a public protest of just families who lived in the neighborhood because they had gone door to door. You had just this mass participation. It didn't have to be people who were all willing to go toe to toe against a nazi with a baseball bat. I think it was a working-class, diverse neighborhood of St. Paul saying, "Why are there nazis in our neighborhood?"

And that you can do anti-fascism in a way that you don't have to necessarily compromise your politics or compromise some of the tactics that you're open to. You can still do those things, but also be open to people and "everyday anti-fascism." Anti-fascism doesn't have to be a thing for leftist elites who have been in the movement for 10 years and know all the jargon and all the security culture and have their black-bloc outfit, ready to go stashed in their backpack at a moment's notice or whatever.

But again, I really don't want to wag my finger, there are very important reasons that people are concerned about their security and take the closed-off approach. Not at all saying that it's wrong. But ARA really inspiringly says that it's not the only way, that it is possible to have a more open approach.

**TFSR: I didn't take it personally as you wagging a finger. But there is a**

stereotype of anti-fascist organizing that it bears reminding people that it looks a lot of different ways and whether it'd be the Pop Mob model or public education more widely or going door to door to talk to people, I think is super important.

Or, a thing that we didn't really talk about too much in the book, most of it's been about showing up to respond to reactionaries, but research, documentation, and the distribution of that information about like "You've got a dangerous nazi that lives in your neighborhood. Did you know that? You might want to be careful or maybe you should shame them?" Not everyone's gonna be a Tom Metzger, get a TV show, or be super public-facing about it, because thankfully, being a nazi or Klan member, or any of these variant anti-Semite jerks is generally not an acceptable thing in our society. It's good to make it- It's not just the good white Vanguard versus the bad white Vanguard fighting each other.

SC: So that's a big one that comes to mind as far as lessons just because it's so visible. Otherwise, we talked about the possibilities of ARA tying in with reproductive freedom. That did not detract from but very much strengthened ARA's anti-fascist and anti-racist organizing, while also supporting reproductive freedom. So that's awesome. Something that anti-fascist and anti-racist can still do.

I mentioned it, but we didn't talk a ton about the concrete ways in which ARA was tied to youth culture. That's really cool. It ties to the above-ground organizing as well, that it's hard to have a fundraiser for your group if you're hiding 100% of your identities, maybe. So it may be related, but ARA had a really strong base of support in youth culture and it's also good not to just shut ourselves off in echo chambers of punk rock kids or whatever, but it is cool and positive for anti-racist politics to have that base of support. Also, that punk as a bastion of at least vaguely progressive politics didn't come from anywhere and didn't happen overnight, it had people like Anti-Racist Action, organizing for it, and making sure that that was the case when maybe it could have gone a different direction, maybe nazis could have taken over the punk scene. Now the whole generation of kids who came up in the punk scene and got pushed towards leftist politics could have instead been pushed towards nazism. We didn't have that because ARA and other groups did that work. So, that's really cool that ARA had a positive influence, it didn't just take from youth culture and that was a place where they could go for recruits or money. It built youth culture. Some chapters literally ran venues and said, "Hey, this is a place we can get together. We can be safe. Racism isn't cool here. Sexism isn't cool here." "Cool" is a good word to use there. They were making anti-racism cool.

In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, published by INCITE, women of color against violence, there's a chapter about the women's lib movement consciousness-raising groups versus nonprofits that are giving support to survivors of abuse. Obviously, having institutions like that are important. It's not criticizing the idea of having shelters for people who have been abused. But for a lot of leftists, or at least in my generation, we think of "awareness-raising" as something that's so abstract and not cool. If all you're doing is awareness raising, then "Oh, you're not

doing real work.” But consciousness-raising and the women’s lib movement fundamentally saying patriarchy is not fucking okay really matters. It doesn’t have to be concrete policy goals. It doesn’t have to be concretely shutting down this racist group. If you are going out and educating people and changing people’s minds on a mass-social-movement level, that does matter. ARA managed to do that in meaningful ways, with their connections to youth culture.

Interesting lessons, not clear answers, but lessons for sure, of ARA’s history. Was it a “white anti-racist group”? Was it a multiracial group? Would chapters work in solidarity with POC-lead organizing, would they be a part of POC-lead organizing? There are many different strategies. Those are perennial challenges really for leftism, and ARA offers many different examples of ways to approach that, and how you might connect anti-fascism to more day-to-day anti-racism.

I hope I am not just rattling them off because they’re big topics, but maybe if the listener wants to know, they just have to purchase *We Go Where They Go* from PM Press or a University of Regina Press or Working Class History. That’s the US, Canada, and Europe, respectively. If you’re just thinking like “Oh, Shannon, you’re so smart, I wish I could keep this going”, then you gotta buy the book.

**TFSR: Or you come to their town and give a talk?**

**SC:** Sure, deadass, ask me, [shannonclay@protonmail.com](mailto:shannonclay@protonmail.com), people can email me.

**TFSR: I didn’t want to interrupt you. When you were talking about the importance of keeping engaged with youth culture, people were running venues also, people were in bands, and people were shifting this. We’ve seen there is a separate milieu of white-power punk bands out there that are run by white-power groups. Resistance Records stuff, it gets bigger in metal, there’s more space for the crossover because of the idea of extremism and all the layers of the culture of metal allow for just extremity that sometimes invites in nazi imagery, but doesn’t have to.**

**But it’s also worth noting the Warped Tour and the work that Mighty Mighty BossTones as a band did to popularize and spread anti-racist activity in the punk and ska scene, digging back to the skinhead roots of the earlier groups that founded the network, I thought that was super inspiring. That coincided with that huge jump in membership over those three years.**

**SC:** Absolutely. I don’t want to say generation because it cuts across age. But just in this cultural moment, A lot of us are wondering is ska cool again? Can I listen to third-wave ska? And this book establishes that the Mighty Mighty BossTones were anti-racist actually. So you are allowed to listen to the Mighty Mighty BossTones if you want to. Every time someone told me that the Mighty Mighty BossTones were a big part of how ARA grew, I learned this five years ago now and I’m still laughing about it. Dear listener, the Mighty Mighty BossTones, and ARA met at Lollapalooza. Boston’s had ARA on tour and ARA got the word out a lot through that. Hilarious.

**TFSR: That's great. Any group that has one position in the band's job is literally just to skank onstage. Skanking is their instrument.**

**SC:** Skanking while shouting against fascism!

**TFSR: But also, one of the earlier big concerts that I went to was to see Rage Against The Machine on tour for Evil Empire. They had Zapatistas support org and the FZLN had a table at that venue. ARA, probably a chapter from LA, but maybe it was the Bay Area chapter, had a table at that venue. That was the first time I heard of the organization. Some bands got pressured to stop playing with nazis. Some bands engaged around pushing venues and pushing content and making space for awesome, collective organizing projects with good politics.**

**SC:** Absolutely. Thanks to Tom Morello for giving us a nice review.

**TFSR: That's nice. That's cool.**

**How do you feel, were there any burning things that we didn't talk about that you wanted to address? I have kept you on for a very long time. I enjoyed the conversation and I enjoyed the book and I hope that people don't steal it from Firestorm, please.**

**SC:** Of course, people are gonna think I'm biased because I wrote the book. It's a good book. I doubt that all right another book is good, that the history really speaks for itself. It's an incredibly important and interesting and powerful history. Don't take it from me is "the author," I really feel like I stumbled into and I'm hugely privileged to have been a part of telling this history because the history itself is just so good and powerful. We did really try to let the people who were there speak through the book. Ignore the fact that I'm one of the authors. It's a really good book and if you think you might want to buy it, buy it. You'll be glad you did.

**TFSR: Awesome. Thank you again for taking the time. Are there any social media that you'd like to point people to? You gave out your email already.**

**SC:** I guess that's maybe Boomer energy a bit but I don't really do social media. So for real, if people want to talk, they can email me. Thank you again, so much for having me. I told you this before we recorded but not up till now, I am a big fan of the show, longtime first time, so very happy to be here. Thank you for having me. Super appreciate it. I had a lovely time.

**TFSR: You too. Thanks a lot.**

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